

Standards Committee

23 May 2006



Annual Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life 2005.

Report of Andrew North, Deputy Chief Executive (Corporate Services) and Monitoring Officer

Purpose of the Report

1. To advise members about the publication of the Annual Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life 2005.

Background

2. The Committee on Standards in Public Life was established in 1994 with the following terms of reference *To examine current concerns about standards of conduct of all holders of public office, including arrangements relating to financial and commercial activities, and make recommendations as to any changes in present arrangements which might be required to ensure the highest standards of propriety in public life.*
3. The Committee's terms of reference were expanded in 1997 *To review issues in relation to the funding of political parties, and to make recommendations as to any changes in present arrangements.*
4. The Committee is an independent advisory Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB). The Prime Minister appoints its members for renewable periods of up to three years and the current Chairman is Sir Alistair Graham.

Overview of Activities in 2005

5. The Annual Report presents an overview of the Committees' main activities in 2005. A copy has been placed in the Members Resource Centre and it is also available on line at www.public-standards.gov.uk.

Tenth Report *Getting the Balance Right: Implementing Standards of Conduct in Public Life*

6. In 2005 the Committee published its Tenth Report *Getting the Balance Right: Implementing Standards of Conduct in Public Life*. The Tenth Report contained 38 recommendations which included changes to the local government ethical framework for standards so that there is:
 - A move to **locally-based arrangements** for the initial handling, investigation and determination of complaints by existing local Standards Committees for all but the most serious cases of alleged misconduct;
 - A strengthening of the **independent composition** of local Standards Committees in preparation to take on their new role of complaint handling from 2007;
 - Changes to the **Code of Conduct** to make it more accessible to councillors and the public; to remove unnecessary restrictions on councillors representing their constituents; and to make a clearer distinction between private and official conduct;
7. Finally, the report also made recommendations for **further embedding the Seven Principles of Public Life into organisational culture**. The Committee believe that organisational culture is key to delivering high standards of propriety in public life. Leaders of public bodies have a vital role to play in enabling legitimate internal whistle-blowing and fostering a culture that encourages the challenge of inappropriate behaviour at all levels.
8. The Government responded to the Tenth Report on 15 December 2005 as part of its discussion paper *Standards of Conduct in English Local Government: The Future*. Members may recall this featured on the Standards Committee agenda for consideration in February 2006.
9. The Committee welcomed the acceptance by the Government of the majority of its proposals relating to local government. In particular:
 - the fundamental transformation of the Standards Board for England to become a strategic regulator, and a move to **locally-based arrangements for handling complaints** against councillors;
 - changes to the **Code of Conduct** adopting many of the Committee's recommendations and the conclusions of the review by the Standards Board for England.

The Committee's Post Election Consultation Exercise

10. The Annual Report also includes details of a post election consultation exercise undertaken by the Committee between May and September 2005 with key stakeholders prior to agreeing it's next enquiry and a forward work plan.

11. Following the consultation exercise and discussions with the Cabinet Secretary on behalf of the Prime Minister the Committee has decided to review the Electoral Commission for its Eleventh Inquiry. It will consider whether the Commission's mandate, governance arrangements and accountability framework are fit for the Commission's stated purpose of "*promoting integrity, involvement and effectiveness in the democratic process*".

12. Members are asked to note the report and will be kept apprised of further developments.

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